

RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Quarterly

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An Incident At Velletri On the Road To Rome - 1944



Moving through a mountain village near Forino, April 1944

Introduction

While it is true that many letters are written home in wartime, occasionally one special piece of correspondence surfaces which needs to be shared. Such a letter recently came to the attention of the Rutland Historical Society and is the subject of this Quarterly. It was written during the Italian Campaign of World War II in 1944 by the Society's first president, the late Frederic P. Elwert, and describes his "baptism of fire" near Velletri.

Elwert's lively narrative and self-deprecating humor give insight into what may, or may not, have been a typical wartime encounter. Perhaps partly because his unit had missed some of the hardest early action near Anzio he could afford to take a light-hearted view; or perhaps he wanted to allay the concerns of those back home. At any rate, he was certainly battle-tested and in the thick of the advance on Rome. The engagement at Velletri, in which he participated, "turned the key to the city of Rome and handed it to Gen. Mark Clark" according to CBS correspondent, Eric Sevareid.¹

Elwert carried a camera with him at all times and conscientiously recorded his surroundings. Eleanor Elwert, his wife, and herself a former Rutland Historical Society president, has made many of his photos available for this Quarterly.

Preface

Following the 7 December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor and U.S. entry into World War II, many young Americans rushed to enlist in military service. Among them was New Yorker Frederic P. Elwert, a senior at Columbia College, who was just one semester short of graduation. Nevertheless, he enlisted in February 1942 and received his basic training with Co. E, 143d Infantry Regt., 36th Div. at Camp Blanding, Florida.

Encouraged to attend Officers Candidate School, Elwert left Florida for instruction at Fort Benning, Georgia, and graduated as a Second Lieutenant on 5 November 1942. He was then assigned to 2nd Btn., 341st Infantry at Camp Howze, Gainesville, Texas, for further training. While there, his Barnard College sweetheart, Eleanor Colgan, came from New York and they were married on 9 January 1943.

His next post was Fort Meade, Maryland, and he remained there until late in 1943 when he shipped out to North Africa. By 11 February 1944 he had arrived in Italy and in April was "still in rest area and training men just as we did in the states, only difference is that we fire our weapons and the Italians go about their plowing and hoeing right in the middle of the noise and bullets".

In June 1944 he wrote home, "I have been in combat and have come through in good shape."

The letter reproduced here, written 1 July 1944, describes the aforementioned combat. It is addressed to "Daddy" who was Elwert's father-in-law. John D. Colgan.

¹Robert H. Adelman and Col. George Walton, *Rome Fell Today*, p. 9; Orientation Branch, Information and Education Division, U.S. Army, *The Story of the 36th Infantry Division*, p. 10.



Top: (l.) Fred Elwert in basic training, Camp Blanding, Florida. (r.) Fred and new bride Eleanor Colgan near Camp Howze, Texas. Below: Fred astride horse at Casablanca in North Africa on 10 December 1943.



Elwert's Italian Odyssey:



His Photographic Record



[Photo numbers correspond with place names on map.] Left page: 2. The road to Velletri; 6. Cassino; 7. Palace at Caserta, one-time Fifth Army headquarters. Right page: 8. Relaxing in camp at Maddaloni; 9. Bay of Naples; 10. A religious procession near Avellino; 11. Forino; 13. Men training in a lumber mill at Battipaglia; 14. Paestum temple.

An Incident At Velletri On the Road To Rome - 1944

Italy
1 July 1944

Dear Daddy,

Without trying to be dramatic I'd like to explain this writing paper. These sheets of what appears to be graph paper were cut from a note book taken from the still warm body of a German officer, namely one Lieutenant Heiner Deipenbrok, 08692B. Later in another letter I shall give you an account of the circumstances under which I acquired this booty [See maps on pp. 33 & 35.]

First let me thank you for your recent letter which arrived some few days ago. I don't recall the exact date but I know that I read it in some wealthy Italian's home in one of those innumerable towns through which we have been fighting these past few weeks.

I don't have your letter before me but I can remember what you said about the Pope and I can assure you that as far as I know neither Mr. F. Roosevelt nor his representative, Gen'l Clark, carried the Pope away. I don't think Clark even gave the Pope a ride in his jeep.

The rumor about the fall of Rome has been confirmed. I marched, rather trudged, through its crowded streets on the morning after its fall. After several weeks of chasing the Jerries well above Rome I had the pleasure of taking over the city during a 5 day "rest" at the Foro Mussolini, erstwhile Fascist college for promising Fascisti.

My part in the campaign was just about [as] would be expected of a 2nd Lt—very small. At times though, the Germans must have thought that I was the Commanding General, judging by the large number of 88 shells and machine pistol bullets which I was positive were being aimed at me—and me alone. I imagine I was just being a bit self conscious, though.

I can mention some details about my personal participation in the current campaign, but I must hold my pen in check as soon as I write about the fall of Rome. (Actually, the town didn't fall, although the Colosseum and several castles look as though they are about to topple over.)

Anzio was my jumping off place although a week after my arrival there it could no longer be called a beachhead. After bivouacing in a "rear" area of the beachhead and enjoying the nightly visits of the Anzio Express—the mammoth railway gun which we all swore was firing from positions north of the Brenner Pass—we entrucked at night to Cisterna which had just been taken that afternoon. From there we beat the brush between Velletri and Cori, hoping to flush snipers and such from isolated positions in buildings and thickets. After a few days of this mopping up we ran into a rear guard action a few miles short of Velletri. It was here that I received my baptism of fire. I had sweated out long range shelling at Anzio and mild sporadic shelling a few days previously but the night of the 29th of May was my coming out party.

My company was dug in north of a RR in preparation for a coming attack. My platoon (2 machine guns and 3 mortars) was in position south of the RR and



Top: (l.) Bomb-damaged dining room of a manor house near Battipaglia. (r.) Conversation with fishermen on the beach at Anzio, May 1944. Bottom: (l.) Resting northeast of Cisterna, May 1944 (Elwert second from left). (r.) An American machine gun emplacement on the road to Rome.

several hundred yards from the main body. Ordinarily, my weapons would be much closer to the rest of the company and, of course, better protected. But my mission was to protect the south flank of the company, which was open. This I did by digging my mortars in behind a bank with target areas on the company flank. Very few Jerries would dare infiltrate through mortar fire and I doubt if any would get through. My machine guns were placed in the upper story of a farm house. They sat on tables well back from the open window and covered roughly the same area

that my mortars did. To my rear was a disabled tank destroyer which had slipped a tread in the soft soil of the bank behind the house. Its crew was patiently waiting for a recovery vehicle to tow it away and meanwhile they were brewing coffee and heating their rations.

There are always a few men in the platoon who are good at living off the land and we soon had all the onions and vino we wanted. We cooked a fairly decent meal and for most of the afternoon we were enjoying ourselves.

Then things began to happen. First my machine guns were ordered sent to the company area to bolster the defenses in case of a counterattack. Here I was—sitting out on a limb with no automatic weapons. Fortunately the TD [tank destroyer] crew came to my assistance and loaned me the .50 cal MG which was mounted on their vehicle. The .50 was emplaced in the best position to cover the flank but I still wasn't secure. So, I left each weapon with a skeleton crew and established listening outposts on the perimeter of my area. To be safe I sent my two jeeps back to the Battalion Motor Pool for ammo.

I now felt reasonably secure and quietly waited for darkness to fall and then sweat out the night.

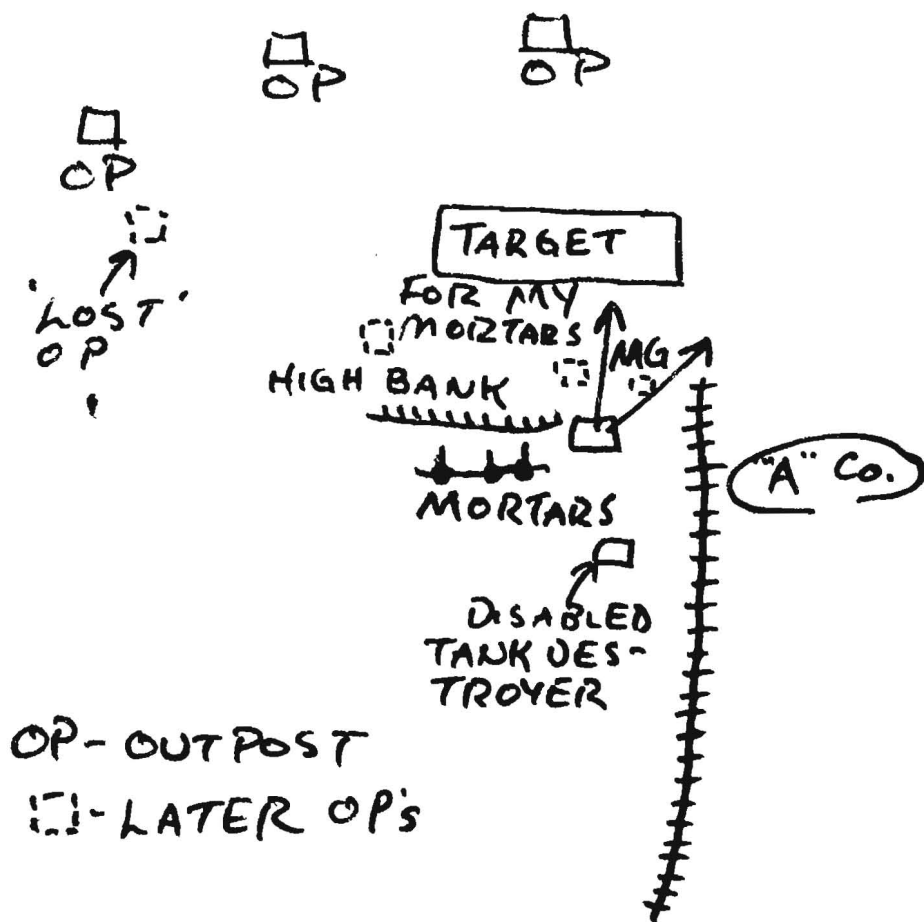
About ten PM the first shells began to drop near the house. That was Jerry, alright, but we went below and came through without any further trouble.

Then a half hour later Jerry patrols started to work their way toward us. They have a habit of getting in a hole or behind a rise of ground and firing their machine pistols (similar to our Tommy guns) into the air. No one gets hurt by such tactics but the fear of God is instilled in every green man when the bullets strike a tree or the building behind us and snap viciously. Actually, after several exposures to this miniature war of nerves one is inclined to laugh inwardly and speculate on the weight of the ammunition a machine pistol has to carry in order to carry out his boogeyman mission.

But I was green and blanched and flinched each time a bullet cracked 30 feet overhead. I was thankful for my outposts and did nothing but wait for reports or the sound of our rifles firing on a spotted patrol.

Then it happened. Our Battalion Heavy Mortars, hearing the enemy activity in my area began dropping shells on Jerry and—on my outposts. Our mortar fire is deadly and it's no fun sweating out your own shelling. The mortar firing stopped several long minutes later and I immediately sent my runners (messengers) out to the outposts to check on them and to tell them to pull back to positions closer to the platoon. One by one, the outposts returned with hair-raising (and, naturally, exaggerated) reports of how this shell landed two feet away and how this shell covered with dirt the men in their holes. One OP was still unaccounted for and I sent a patrol of 3 men out to look for them. The patrol returned with bad news. The OP position was deserted. I crossed the men off in my mind—captured. One of my runners, a Mexican named Sancedo—one of the neatest and most conscientious soldiers in the company, went haywire. He grabbed a Tommy gun and disappeared. We could hear him fire one magazine after another. What he saw, what he was firing at and what he hit we couldn't tell. He returned, cursing and demanding more ammunition. He went out again and I joined him. We passed our outposts and cautioned them not to shoot us when we returned and as silently as we could we pushed our way thru a vineyard. About a 100 yards out we

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Page one of Elwert's maps of the two-day action at Velletri drawn on graph paper confiscated from the body of a German officer.

crouched in a shell hole and he emptied his magazine and I fired all 15 rounds in my carbine magazine. Then we ducked and waited. We must have waited about 1/10 of a second when 2 streams of machine pistol tracers converged over our heads. Knowing that Jerry indicates mortar fire by converging tracer streams, we got the Hell out of there. I ran as fast as I could and was frustrated every few yards by the wires which hold up the grape vines. Making as much noise as a flushed covey of quail we rushed past our outposts—who must have expected a battalion of Jerries—and retired to the Command Post for a glass of vino.

The non-coms and myself took turns that night in patrolling the outposts and checking our positions. Another job we had that night was for each of us, as we passed each mortar position, to drop a mortar shell in our target area to discourage any more activity on the part of Jerry. We didn't expect to hit anything but if a shell landed a hundred yards from a Jerry he would be mighty careful to move a bit more slowly and perhaps even turn tail.

Our patrol included visiting our .50 cal and I never saw more moving forms and crawling bodies as I did that night. The next morning my imaginary Jerries of the night before were nothing more than a tree, grapevines and a haystack.

Morning finally came and I had to report to the CO that 3 of my men were missing. He took it quietly and that disturbed me instead of putting me at ease.

I returned to my platoon and found my 3 lost men back, drinking coffee. They too, had alarming tales of the mortar shelling and during a lull had retired to a wine cellar. After the shelling they maintained their outpost from the entrance to the cellar and stayed there all night.

Another rifle company had moved in by now and took over the mission I had on the south flank.

I moved my mortars back to the company and was then summoned by the Company Commander.

"Elwert", he said, "I want you to take a 536 [a radio the size of a cigarette carton] and accompany this squad as a mortar observer. The patrol will move aggressively and will knock out any opposition between here and the junction of the RR."

It was a tough mission but I had never been on a patrol and had never fired my mortar at point targets. So, fortified with a few glasses of vino, I set out, tagging along at the rear of the patrol as I had been ordered—I was not to do any fighting—just direct mortar fire over the radio.

We moved out across wheat fields, through vineyards and by small farm houses, each of which was investigated carefully. I was becoming impatient with the Sergeant in charge of the squad who allowed his patrol to move in single file instead of deploying and getting some use out of his fire power. I kept telling him what to do—which I wasn't supposed to do—and soon I was moving with the advance elements.

Then I saw my first live Jerry in his natural habitat. I had seen plenty of prisoners but they were like caged animals and just as harmless. But this one was in a hole, he had a weapon and, not the least, he probably had some fight left in him. All I saw of him was a quick glimpse of that peaked visored cap that Jerry wears in place of a helmet. He ducked into his hole instantly as soon as he saw me. The first thing I remember doing is throwing a grenade at him. It went about 20 yards and fell a few feet short of his dugout.

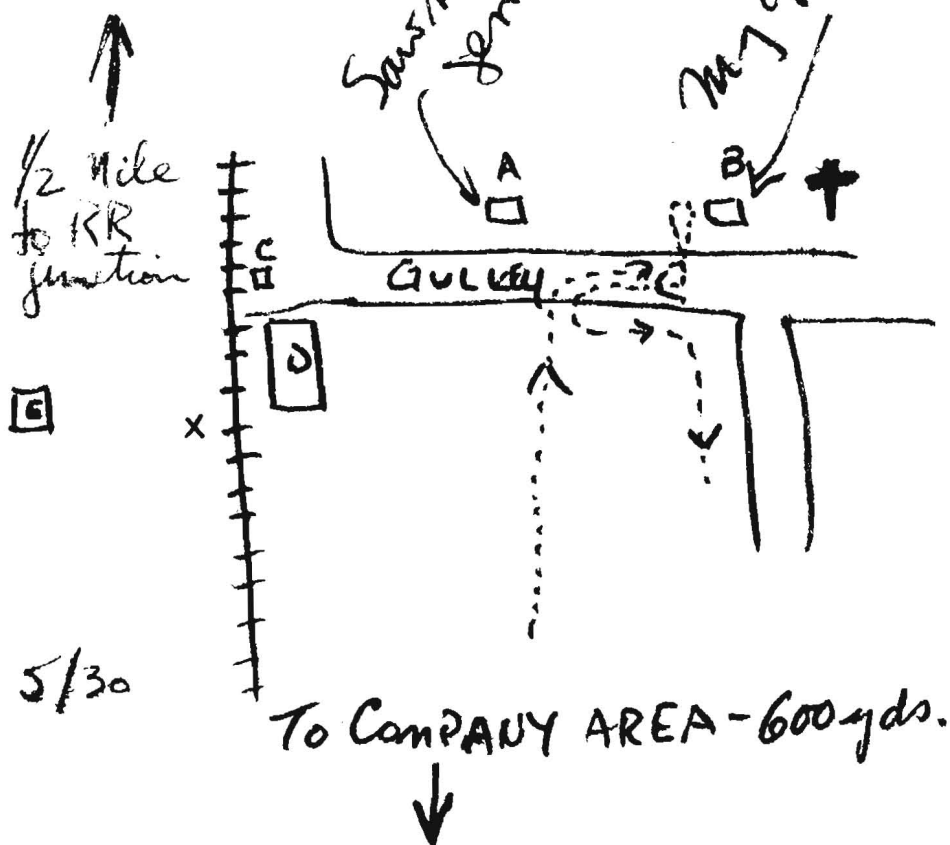
X - I WAS A SNIPER TARGET ^{HERE}

A B C - JERRY EMPLACEMENTS

D - YELLOW HOUSE

E - WHITE HOUSE

+ - Jerry grave



Day Two map.

I don't know why but I jumped forward by myself into a gully 15 feet deep (which I found later was covered by an emplacement at the end of the gully to the left) turned right and climbed up the opposite bank in an endeavor to flank the dugout from the right.

Remember now, that I had my carbine and a radio with me and had used my only hand grenade just a few moments before.

I reached the top of the bank and crawled forward. Something made me turn my head to the right (I later found out that one of our riflemen had fired a shot at a Jerry who had a rifle pointed at my head at a range of 3 feet) and I saw a hand with a potatoe masher grenade sticking out of a hole only 3 feet from where I lay. The grenade went off right next to my foot and, thank God, didn't hurt me a bit. I pointed my carbine at the dugout and fired several rounds into the dirt around it. Again the hand came out with another grenade and this time I felt my luck wouldn't hold so I turned around and dove into the gulley. Then I did one of the most amazing things anyone ever did in such a situation.

With bullets snapping all around me, I picked my helmet up and put it on and then reached for my radio and slung it over my shoulder. I didn't realize it at the time but my sunglasses came off in my headlong dive into the ditch. I think that if I had known that my glasses slipped off I would have started to look for them. I miss them very much and I've felt like kicking myself for not taping the glasses to my forehead or otherwise securing them.

Another incident which later caused me alternately to break into a sweat and laugh was that as I was running in the ditch I held the carbine at my side, muzzle down, with my finger on the trigger. The safety, of course, was off and each time my right foot hit the ground as I ran, the jar would jerk the trigger. So here I was running like mad with Jerry shooting at me and Elwert shooting at himself. If—if—one of my bullets had hit me in the leg or foot I doubt very much whether I could have scrambled up the bank to the safety of the squad.

I crawled back to where I belonged - near the end of the squad—and opened up the radio. Breathlessly I pulled the aerial out, pressed the transmitter button and whispered—I mean whispered, because that damn aerial was sticking up above the grape vines like the spire of the Garden City Cathedral—whispered the call sign, "Ranger [that's me] to Ziggy", [that's Zimmerman, my mortar sergeant]. I felt like crying and yelling and jumping for joy when I heard, "Ziggy to Ranger", through the earphone. I could have sworn, though, that every German within two miles heard it.

I had previously arranged for area numbers indicating the direction in which to lay the mortar initially. So I whispered, "Ranger to Ziggy, Number 3, 1000, one round." [1000 is the # of yards - the range]. I received an acknowledgement and shortly thereafter heard "On the way" and then a faint swoosh and then a muffled roar as the shell hit. Too far to the right and way over, so I gradually brought the shells closer and closer until one landed between the two dugouts. Then I kept calling for 9 rounds, 27 rounds, repeat 27, repeat 27. I was told later that every man in the platoon was hauling ammunition and also helping the assistant gunner drop shells in the mortar. The total number of rounds fired was well over a hundred. I didn't know the effect of my firing until just the other day when I re-visited the scene of the skirmish. To the right of the right dugout there was a carefully



Top: (l.) Dining in camp. (r.) Company Commander James McNeil at Forino. He was killed in France in September 1944. Bottom: (l.) Staff sergeants Zimmerman and Mohr on a ten-minute break, May 1944. (r.) Elwert in front of a "Jerry" pill-box.

made cross—undoubtedly German. The main attack on this position did not begin until two days after I hit it so Jerry had time to bury his dead. If the main attack had killed him he would have been hauled back and buried with other Jerries in one of our cemeteries. So, scratch one square head.

One of my mortar shells hit what I thought was an ammunition dump 50 yards behind the two dugouts. A roaring fire started during my shelling. I thought

I heard occasional explosions but, as my later visit showed, I was mistaken. I had hit and set afire a thatched hut filled with wine casks and farm tools. Vandalism.

After all this I crossed the RR and ran into sniper trouble.

Some son of a gun was shooting at me and I'm thankful he had bad eyes or hiccoughs. One time, though, a round struck between my outstretched fingers as I lay prone by the RR.

To my right front less than 20 yards away was a large yellow house which may have housed the sniper. I looked at every window, crevice and cranny in, on, and around the house and couldn't find a trace of a sniper.

I was conscious of artillery fire falling rather close but didn't think much of it until I happened to look at the yellow house a second time. Near the eaves on the side of the house nearest me there was a gaping hole. A shell swished overhead, there was a blast and there was another hole in the house.

Our tanks were firing at a target less than 20 yards away from our patrol! That was enough. I pulled the patrol back, counted noses, found two men missing. I went back with another man and found one poor fellow dead by the RR across from where I was. Rifle bullet through the left breast. The lost man is still "Missing in Action".

So ended my first 24 hours of contact with the enemy. The papers probably had this to say:

"Southeast of Velletri enemy resistance has been characterized by delaying actions. Our activity has been confined to patrols and artillery duels."

No?

I'm running out of time—it's now 1245 PM and I had better think of tomorrow.

In haste,

Sincerely,

Freddie

Postscript

After the fall of Rome, which coincided with the Allied invasion of France in June 1944, Elwert and his unit returned south to Paestum. By late 1944 Elwert had been assigned to the south of France. Here, and for a time in Italy, he had the opportunity to indulge his interest in history and the arts—visiting ancient sites and attending the opera.

When the war in Europe ended, Elwert returned home and resumed his education under the G.I. Bill. He completed his degree work at Columbia and graduated in 1948 from the School of Forestry at Yale University. He and Eleanor and their six children settled in Rutland where he was a forester and later a side judge. He was a founder and first president of the Rutland Historical Society, contributing much time and effort to its early organization and activities.



Above: (l.) Elwert at Paestum sitting on the breech of an Italian naval gun. He proudly wears his Combat Infantryman's badge on his left chest. (r.) Elwert in his jeep before ruins in Southern France, January 1945. Below: Two American soldiers on 5 May 1945 read about Hitler's death.



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